

## **State needs to recruit and retain Latino teachers**

Dominican poet Chiqui Vicioso has a great line, "Until I came to New York, I didn't know I was black."

Hispanics are a very diverse group. We are not one nationality and we are not one culture, in fact we are not one race.

So what is a Hispanic?

Most Hispanics don't think of themselves as Hispanics and most of us identify better as Latino, Latina or Chicano. Most important we are Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Salvadorian or Mexican-American, Cuban-American or just plain American.

Latinos have provided the American culture and life language, cuisine, music, art, and many other contributions. We have been influencing America as much as America influences us.

But several things are very important to Latinos. Language remains a huge barrier that continues to prevent participation in the American life. Political influence has yet to be a major drive in American politics, although Latinos are starting to get the message that they can become a major force in the American political scene.

A top focus for Latinos is the topic of education. Many polls indicate that education matters more to Latinos than any political issue or social cause.

I had the opportunity to address the Washington state Higher Education Coordinating Board during a discussion about increasing minority participation and success in higher education. The board reviewed a draft of the recommendations for a diversity master plan, which should be ready for adoption in December 2007.

The board was mindful of Initiative 200, which prohibits state and local agencies from discriminating or granting preferential treatment to any individual or group, but the initiative does not prevent government agencies from creating programs consistent with the mission of higher education or efforts to provide equal access to all Washington students.

The board members received recommendations, which included incorporating diversity as essential to the mission of higher education. They also discussed a policy for higher education access based on demographic trends, different levels of academic preparation and economic disadvantage. Probably the aspect that impressed me the most was the effort to establish a system of accountability — aggressive goals to improve student access and completion of course work; recruitment; retention and promotion of faculty and staff of color.

An education diversity policy needs to provide strategies that are known to work with Latino students, what would keep them in school and understands what works and what doesn't. Schools need to establish strong partnerships with parents, provide information, reduce class sizes, bolster student resources and social services.

The state needs to recruit and retain Latino teachers and mentor new ones. Education policy needs to make a difference and it needs to focus on the needs of students. Education policy needs to provide Latino and all students with access, retention, services and support so they can graduate.

I believe the Higher Education Coordinating Board is on the right path and hopefully some of their effort will result in correcting education disparities among Latinos and other students of color. The success of education policy will be measured on the ability to educate the most difficult to reach.

Felix Negrón, a member of The Olympian's Diversity Panel, is a commissioner with the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs. He can be reached at [flnegron@hotmail.com](mailto:flnegron@hotmail.com).